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Do we need to take the undecideds seriously?

Posted on 23rd January 2014 by Jan Eichhorn

In the 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey respondents were asked how they would vote in the referendum as follows:

In the referendum, you will be asked, 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' If you do vote, will you vote 'Yes' or vote 'No' – or haven't you decided yet?

Asked in this about how they will vote, no less than 33% said that they were undecided.

Should we care about these voters? Could they yet move the otherwise rather stable polls in one direction or the other? Are they a group of people who are having real difficulty making up their mind, or do they simply have no interest in doing so?

Some of the undecideds are indeed just uninterested in politics. Among those who say they do not have any interest in politics at all, no less than 47% have not made up their mind. However only 12% of all Scots fall into this group. Once we look at those people who say they do not have very much interest – but thus at least a little – the proportion that are undecided falls to 39%, only a little above the figure for all voters in Scotland.

So while there are some who simply do not seem to care, it is a minority group. What then does characterise the undecided rather better? Socio-demographics do not. While women are somewhat less likely to have made a decision, there are no clear, robust patterns when it comes to someone's age, social class or education.

People's sense of party identification – or lack of it – does, however, make a difference. No less than 48% of those who say they do not identify with a party at all are undecided. At the same time, however, those who identify with the Conservatives (11%) or the Liberal Democrats (15%) are much less likely to be undecided than those who support either Labour (36%) or the SNP (35%).

How efficacious people feel about making a decision about independence, together with how much difference they think independence would make to their everyday lives, matters too. The more that someone feels they know about independence, and the more they think that independence would make

a difference to their everyday lives, the more likely they are to have made up their minds. In short, many people's indecision is a result of their feelings about the particular choice they are being asked to make, rather than any general sense of disaffection.

This becomes even clearer when we look the position of those whose preferred constitutional solution is some form of 'devolution max' within the framework of the UK, a position backed by 32% of respondents in the SSA survey. No less than 45% of this group of voters are undecided, compared with 30% amongst the remainder of the population. Equally, among those respondents who would have preferred to have had a second question on enhanced devolution on the ballot (some 52% of all voters) as many as 40% are undecided – compared with only 22% of those who are happy for the independence question alone to be included on the ballot paper.

So, many voters are finding it difficult to make up their mind because they cannot vote for what they really want. As a result, supporters of more devolution are potentially a key group in the referendum. Both sides could hope to shift the polls by making a successful pitch for their votes. What remains to be seen is whether either side is up to that task.

You can [read further details](#) of the research summarised in this blog or [analyse the SSA 2013 data](#) for yourself.

Topics: [Attitudes to independence](#), [Referendum voting intention](#), [The Referendum process](#)

About the author



Dr Jan Eichhorn is a research fellow at the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science. His research focuses on issues of political participation as well as subjective well-being.